

Inside the spooky skeleton of Bryce, Alabama's historic insane hospital, as it undergoes restoration



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In 2010, the University of Alabama bought the historic Bryce Hospital, built in the 1850s and opened in 1861 as the Alabama State Hospital for the Insane. The massive facility was in need of extensive renovations and, with only about 250 in-patients remaining, the massive complex was larger than the state Department of Mental Health could use. In 2014, patients were moved to a new facility nearby and the university began a \$121 million restoration of the original four-story main hospital building and four of the six original wings. According to University of Alabama planner Dan Wolfe, the new facility will be used as a university welcome center, a museum of mental health, a museum of the university's history, and event space. It will also house the school of performing arts and a new auditorium. The project is scheduled for completion in 2020. During that time, AL.com will post updates on its progress, as well as vintage photos and history of the facility.

The many faces of the Alabama State Hospital for the Insane

In the more than 15 decades since the first hand-molded brick was laid to build the Alabama State Hospital for the Insane in Tuscaloosa, the world outside its front doors has changed drastically. Within four years of its 1861 opening as a state-of-the-art facility to treat people with mental illness, [superintendent Peter Bryce](#) watched from the cupola observatory as Union troops burned the campus of the University of Alabama.



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The facility, later renamed Bryce Hospital, was built to house 400 patients and initially held 250. It was a self-sustaining community where people labeled mentally ill achieved a sense of purpose by working in fields, dairy barns, pig yards, laundry rooms and kitchens, while living in wards of a beautiful, architecturally detailed manor with billiard rooms, tennis courts, library and chapel. The **[original building was considered an architectural wonder in the Kirkbride-Sloan design](#)**, with three staggered wings leading both east and west from the main four-story administration building. The staggering allowed natural light to enter at the end of each of the wings, rather than having patients live on long, dark wards.

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In its original form with its main building and six wings, and a basement running beneath all of them, **the facility totaled 141,478 square feet**, according to Bryce historian Steve Davis.

As the need for its treatment increased, so did the building's footprint. More wings were added to each side until, at one point, the Ripley's Believe It or Not! newspaper feature claimed Bryce, with all its additions, had the longest roof-line in the world. [Click here to read more.](#)

But in the following decades, funding grew short, patients grew in numbers, and the beautiful facility grew faded. Bryce, now filled with more than 5,000 patients, was no longer a place where patients received one-on-one care. Finally, the impossibility of the mix came to a head in the 1971 lawsuit **Wyatt v. Stickney** and the hospital was given new government mandates to follow. Farm operations ceased. Just as it had been built in phases, Bryce began to shrink, bit-by-bit. The farm buildings and outermost wings were demolished in the 1980s and 1990s until finally, in the 21st century, only the original building and its six wings remained, as well as a few of the modern additions such as an auditorium at the rear of the main building.

Saving the 155-year-old facility

Over those decades when Bryce was growing smaller, the University of Alabama grew larger, until it surrounded the beautiful old facility. In 2010, mental health authorities sold the building and its 180 acres to the university with the stipulation that Bryce would be saved, a task taken seriously by Tim Leopard, vice president of [UA construction](#). He and his team are working with Davis and the [Alabama Historical Commission](#) to save as much of the original facility as possible, he said.

To restore the building, the university first had to strip it back to its original bones. University planner Dan Wolfe said it was impossible to save the two outermost wings, one each on the west side and the east side. Those wings had been closed and unused for decades and were too deteriorated to save, he said.

Artifacts include an electric-shock therapy machine & skeleton keys made by patients from spoons and butter knives.

However, some of the original bricks, as well as fixtures, have been presented to Davis, who is storing them at [the new Bryce facility](#) to hopefully be displayed at the museum. He had already begun the collection of artifacts, including a coffin made at the hospital by patients, before the site was turned over to the university but he said a number of additional artifacts were found during demolition, including a 1915 Bausch and Lomb microscope that was marked as property of Dr. James Searcy, Peter Bryce's successor. Davis has also preserved an autoclave for sterilizing equipment, an electric-shock therapy machine and numerous skeleton keys made by patients from spoons and butter knives for escape attempts.



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Wolfe said the east and west wings will be restored differently. When dismantling the various alterations done over the years, such as walls added to create additional patient rooms or to re-purpose space, construction crews discovered most of the original walls were structural, meaning they could not be moved because they supported floors and walls. But the original patient-room spaces were too small to be used for many of the university's purposes so the east wing is being stripped to its outer walls and a new steel support structure is being built inside it so the university can place walls where they are needed.

However, the original interior structure of the two remaining west wings will be maintained, Wolfe said, as will much of the structure of the original main building.

Despite the obvious need for functionality in its design, the hospital featured beautiful architectural detail. In the basement, which was likely used for storing food before the facility had refrigeration, every doorway features brick arches. The main building also features a round room with a domed ceiling separate from the distinctive domed cupola at its top. The top of the round room has four windows resembling eyes peering over campus. Inside the room, which was once a library, a decorative molding curves around the top and doorways are topped by circular wooden details. Historians will replicate the molding and wood details to replace deteriorated portions, Leopard said.

Wolfe said a similar technique is being used to repair the wrought-iron banisters and railings on the main staircase, which are decorated with a rose design. The banister will be restored to its original appearance, he said.

Learn more about the history of Bryce in the coming months as the restoration project continues.

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